

Introduction

Dangling Man is a short novel in the form of a journal. The journal keeper is a young Chicagoan – Joseph – an unemployed history graduate, supported by his working wife. He uses his journal to explore how he became what he is, and in particular to understand why, about a year ago, he abandoned the philosophical essays he was writing and began to ‘dangle.’

So wide does the gap seem between himself as he is now and this earnest, innocent past self that he thinks of himself as the earlier Joseph’s double, wearing his cast-off clothes.

Though the earlier Joseph self had been able to function in society, to strike a balance between his work in a travel agency and his scholarly inquiries, he was troubled by a sense of alienation from the world. From his window he would survey the urban prospect – chimneys, warehouses, billboards, parked cars. Does such an environment not deform the soul? ‘Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man’s favor? . . . What would Goethe say to the view from this window?’

It may seem comical that in the Chicago of 1941 someone should have been occupied in such grandiose musings, says Joseph the journal keeper, but in each of us there is an element of the comic or fantastic. Yet he recognizes that by mocking the earlier Joseph’s philosophizing he is denying his better self.

Though in the abstract the early Joseph is prepared to accept that man is aggressive by nature, he can detect in his own heart nothing but gentleness. One of his remoter ambitions is to found a utopian colony where spite and cruelty would be forbidden.

Therefore he is dismayed to find himself being overtaken by fits

of unpredictable violence. He loses his temper with his adolescent niece and spans her, shocking her parents. He manhandles his landlord. He shouts at a bank employee. He seems to be 'a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn.' What is happening to him?

An artist friend tells him that the monstrous city around them is not the real world: the real world is the world of art and thought. Joseph respects this position: through sharing with others the products of his imagination, the artist allows an aggregate of lonely individuals to become some kind of community.

He, Joseph, is unfortunately not an artist. His sole talent is for being a good man. But what is the point of being good by oneself? 'Goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love.' Whereas 'I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail.'

In a powerful passage, Joseph the journal keeper links his violent outbursts to the unbearable contradictions of modern life. Brain-washed into believing that each of us is an individual of inestimable value with an individual destiny, that there is no limit to what we can attain, we set off in quest of our own individual greatness. Failing to find it, we begin to 'hate immoderately and punish ourselves and one another immoderately. The fear of lagging [behind] pursues and maddens us . . . It makes an inner climate of darkness. And occasionally there is a storm of hate and wounding rain out of us.'

In other words, by enthroning Man at the center of the universe, the Enlightenment, particularly in its Romantic phase, imposed impossible psychic demands on us, demands that work themselves out not just in petty fits of violence such as his own, or in such moral aberrations as the pursuit of greatness through crime (*vide* Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov), but also perhaps in the war that is consuming the world. That is why, in a paradoxical move, Joseph the journal writer finally lays down his pen and enlists. The isolation imposed by the ideology of individualism, he concludes, redoubled by the isolation of self-scrutiny, has brought him to the brink of insanity. Perhaps war will teach him what he has been unable to learn from philosophy. So he ends his journal with the cry:

Hurray for regular hours!
And for the supervision of the spirit!
Long live regimentation!

Joseph draws a line between the mere self-obsessed individual wrestling with his thoughts and the artist, who through the demiurgic faculty of the imagination turns his petty personal troubles into universal concerns. But the pretence that Joseph's private wrestlings are mere journal entries meant for his eyes alone is barely maintained. For among the entries are pages – renderings of city scenes for the most part, or sketches of people Joseph meets – whose heightened diction and metaphoric inventiveness betray them as productions of the poetic imagination that not only cry out for a reader but reach out to and create a reader. Joseph may pretend he wishes us to think of him as a failed scholar, but we know, as he must suspect, that he is a born writer.

Dangling Man is long on reflection, short on action. It occupies the uneasy ground between the novella proper and the personal essay or confession. Various personages come onstage and exchange words with the protagonist, but beyond Joseph in his two sketchy manifestations there are no characters, properly speaking. Behind the figure of Joseph can be discerned the lonely, humiliated clerks of Gogol and Dostoevsky, brooding upon revenge; the Roquentin of Sartre's *Nausea*, the scholar who undergoes a strange metaphysical experience that estranges him from the world; and the lonely young poet of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. In this slim first book Bellow has not yet developed a vehicle adequate to the kind of novel he is feeling his way towards, one that will offer the customary novelistic satisfactions, including involvement in what feels like real-life conflict in a real-life world, and yet leave the author free to deploy his reading in European literature and thought in order to explore problems in contemporary life. For that step in Bellow's evolution we will have to wait for *Herzog* (1964).

Dangling Man

December 15, 1942

There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy – an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman – that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace back to Alexander the Great – is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, a closemouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.

If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice. In my present state of demoralization, it has become necessary for me to keep a journal – that is, to talk to myself – and I do not feel guilty of self-indulgence in the least. The hard-boiled are compensated for their silence; they fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon, whereas I rarely leave my room.

In a city where one has lived nearly all his life, it is not likely that he will ever be solitary; and yet, in a very real sense, I am just that. I am alone ten hours a day in a single room. As such places go, it is not bad, though there are the standard rooming-house annoyances: cooking odors, roaches, and peculiar neighbors. But over the years I have become accustomed to all three.

I am well supplied with books. My wife is always bringing new ones in the hope that I will use them. I only wish I could. In the old days, when we had a flat of our own, I read constantly. I was forever buying new books, faster, admittedly, than I could read them. But as long as they surrounded me they stood as guarantors of an extended life, far more precious and necessary than the one I was forced to lead daily. If it was impossible to sustain this superior life at all times, I could at least keep its signs within reach. When it became tenuous I could see them and touch them. Now, however, now that I have leisure and should be able to devote myself to the studies I once began, I find myself unable to read. Books do not hold me. After two or three pages or, as it sometimes happens, paragraphs, I simply cannot go on.

Nearly seven months have gone by since I resigned my job at the Inter-American Travel Bureau to answer the Army's call for induction. I am still waiting. It is a trivial-seeming thing, a sort of bureaucratic comedy trimmed out in red tape. At first, I took that attitude toward it myself. It began as a holiday, a short reprieve, last May, when I was sent home because my papers were not in order. I have lived here eighteen years, but I am still Canadian, a British subject, and although a friendly alien I could not be drafted without an investigation. I waited five weeks and then I asked Mr Mallender at Inter-American to take me back temporarily, but business had so fallen off, he told me, that he had been obliged to lay off Mr Trager and Mr Bishop, in spite of their long years of service, and could not possibly help me. At the end of September I was informed by letter that I had been investigated and approved and again, in accordance with the regulations, I was instructed to present myself for a second blood test. A month later I was notified that I was in IA and was told to hold myself ready. Again I waited. Finally, when November came,

I began to inquire and found that through a new clause affecting married men my induction had been postponed. I asked for reclassification, pleading that I had been prevented from working. After three weeks of explaining, I was transferred to 3A. But before I could act (in a week, to be accurate), I was summoned for a new blood test (each holds good for only sixty days). And so I was shifted back. This tedious business has not ended yet, I am sure. It will drag on for another two, three, four months.

Meanwhile, Iva, my wife, has been supporting me. She claims that it is no burden and that she wants me to enjoy this liberty, to read and to do all the delightful things I will be unable to do in the Army. About a year ago, I ambitiously began several essays, mainly biographical, on the philosophers of the Enlightenment. I was in the midst of one on Diderot when I stopped. But it was vaguely understood, when I began to dangle, that I was to continue with them. Iva did not want me to get a job. As a 1A I could not get a suitable one anyhow.

Iva is a quiet girl. She has a way about her that discourages talk. We no longer confide in each other; in fact, there are many things I could not mention to her. We have friends, but we no longer see them. A few live in distant parts of the city. Some are in Washington, and some in the Army; one is abroad. My Chicago friends and I have been growing steadily apart. I have not been too eager to meet them. Possibly some of our differences could be mended. But, as I see it, the main bolt that held us together has given way, and so far I have had no incentive to replace it. And so I am very much alone. I sit idle in my room, anticipating the minor crises of the day, the maid's knock, the appearance of the postman, programs on the radio, and the sure, cyclical distress of certain thoughts.

I have thought of going to work, but I am unwilling to admit that I do not know how to use my freedom and have to embrace the flunkydome of a job because I have no resources – in a word, no character. I made an attempt to enlist in the Navy last time I was reclassified, but induction, it seems, is the only channel for aliens. There is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited. It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing